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In the Sanctuary of Conscience

What is the role of the conscience in our moral life? How does it relate to divine Wisdom and Love? A new article on Christian life.

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“In the depths of our conscience, we detect a law which we do not impose upon ourselves, but which holds us to obedience. Always summoning us to love the good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to our heart: do this, shun

that.”^[1] These words of the Second Vatican Council highlight a common experience. Anyone with the use of reason can perceive an interior voice telling us that it is good to honor one’s parents or to be loyal to others, and that it is bad to steal or to slander.... It also tells us that this basic knowledge of good and evil, which each person applies to specific situations, has not been attained through a lot of deliberation, but is found inside us. And we have it because of our nature, not as a product totally dependent on education and culture. It is not the knowledge about what is *socially correct* or *politically correct* in a specific setting and time, but about principles which cannot change without contradicting our deepest aspiration to happiness.

Not a few people have found God along this path. By reflecting on the reality of the moral conscience they

have discovered “through their reason the voice of God which impels them to do good and avoid evil.”[2] They have come to recognize that the moral conscience, by which we judge that to do this is good and to do that is bad, “is the witness of God himself,”[3] Creator and Lord who guides our free actions, showing us the good path that leads to human perfection and happiness.

However, it will be difficult to discover God through our conscience if we don't want to pay attention to its correct judgments, and prefer to live superficially, letting ourselves be guided by whims or by the pride of not accepting that there is a good that should be done and an evil that should be avoided, claiming to be above good and evil.

In contrast those who, without yet having accepted the gift of faith, listen to and follow the right

judgments of their conscience, can find God in that “inner sanctuary.” They are removing the obstacles to assenting to the supernatural divine Revelation, because they will be better able to understand that the moral law revealed by God in history, and culminating in Christ, is in conformity with those correct judgments. And they will see these with a new light that urges them to follow these judgments with a sure step.

God's voice in our conscience

A non-believer may be searching for the existence of God and discover it by finding inside a sense of the moral good, an inner voice telling us the good we should do and the evil we should avoid.[4] This sense of what is good and the inner voice calling us to do it, are an imprint of the Supreme Truth and Supreme Good that every person can discover.

We see this reality reflected in Jesus' dialogue with the rich young man.

“Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.”[5] Our Lord makes clear that the question of what is good makes sense only because ultimately there is Someone who is absolutely Good: God. The question of that young man reveals “the absolute Good which attracts us and beckons us; it is the echo of a call from God who is the origin and goal of man's life.”[6]

Like the young man, everyone feels that call towards the Good, and finds written on their heart a law that indicates what is good and inclines one to do it. It is a gentle yet strong voice that says: keep the commandments. These are the precepts of the Decalogue, which God

chose to reveal because sin threatens to blur them in many hearts, even though we can come to know them by discovering them inside. Anyone who looks sincerely within themselves can see that these universal precepts—engraved by God in stone for Moses—are also engraved on our heart,^[7] so that we can apply them to specific situations through the judgments of conscience.

These commandments that are present in each person do not ultimately come from us. No human being has invented them; all of us have received them as a participation in the infinite treasure of Wisdom and Goodness that is above us. “The truth dwells inside of man,” says Saint Augustine. And he continues: “if you discover that your nature is changeable, transcend yourself. Go where reason itself receives its light from.”^[8]

“Only God can answer the question about the good, because he is the Good. But God has already given an answer to this question. He did so by creating man and ordering him with wisdom and love to his final end, through the law which is inscribed in his heart, the ‘natural law’.”[9] This law, which each person can discover inside and which conscience applies to particular situations, directs us to God. It is, in fact, the first directing of our free acts to their end,[10] prior to any judgment we may make.

It is a law given to us as a participation in divine Wisdom. The fourth Psalm expresses it by asking a question: *Many say: Who will show us the good?* And the Psalmist answers: *the light of your face, Lord, has been imprinted on our minds.* Thus we can see, Saint Thomas says, “that the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil, which is the

function of the natural law, is nothing else than an imprint on us of the Divine light.”[11] It is possible to deny this transcendent foundation of the natural law, to claim that the conscience is the absolutely autonomous norm of morality, as it is also possible to deny God’s Wisdom and Goodness, and his very existence. But not in the name of reason: not as the result of reasoning, but only as an arbitrary decision of the will.

Nevertheless, it isn’t difficult to foresee the consequence of this presumed absolute autonomy in deciding what is right and what is wrong, leading as it does to “a serious distortion of life in society. If the promotion of the self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend

oneself. Thus society becomes a mass of individuals placed side by side, but without any mutual bonds. Each one wishes to assert himself independently of the other and in fact intends to make his own interests prevail. Still, in the face of other people's analogous interests, some kind of compromise must be found, if one wants a society in which the maximum possible freedom is guaranteed to each individual. In this way, any reference to common values and to a truth absolutely binding on everyone is lost, and social life ventures on to the shifting sands of a complete relativism. At that point everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining: even the first of the fundamental rights, the right to life.”[12]

This is the product of the rupture between the conscience and God, between the natural law that the

conscience applies and divine Wisdom that has placed this law within us as a ray of its light. These consequences, so often quite painful, make clear that the conscience cannot command what is contrary to the moral law that is above it, and that no one can justify an action contrary to the moral law simply by saying that he *acts in conscience*, or that he acts so because his conscience or an impersonal “human conscience” requires it, that is, the opinion of the majority at a given time and place. This is an easy expedient that some people invoke to justify their own views to the detriment of those of others, sometimes even replacing the moral law with the opinion of the strongest.

Whoever reflects on these consequences can understand that the authority of the conscience to direct each person’s conduct does not come from itself but from the fact

that it applies the moral law it discovers imprinted on the heart, and that this law stems from God. Far from being an autonomous source of the moral law, “conscience is like God’s herald and messenger; it does not command what it says by itself but because it comes from God.”^[13] The conscience is thus, as it were, “God’s judgment seat found in the human heart,”^[14] “the sacred place where God speaks to man.”^[15] It can even be said that “when he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.”^[16] In short, God is “the one definitive source of the moral order in the world created by him. Man cannot decide by himself what is good and what is evil ... To man, created in the image of God, the Holy Spirit gives the gift of conscience, so that in this conscience the image may faithfully reflect its model, which is both Wisdom and the eternal law, the

source of the moral order in man and in the world.”[17]

Yearning for God

Many people need to be helped to listen to the voice of a right conscience that points out the good and urges us to do it, and not to confuse this with the voice of selfishness or caprice. They need to recognize in it the higher light of the moral law, a reflection of and participation in divine Wisdom by the human mind. Through the law written on his heart, man can perceive that there is Someone—God our Creator and Lord—who has ordered all things with wisdom and goodness; a Supreme Legislator, author of the moral norms that tell every man what is the path of conduct that accords with human dignity; a Just Judge who will reward each one according to his works.

But often it isn't easy to hear and follow the voice of a right conscience, as St. Paul's words show: *I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members.*[18]

Hence the great need for each person to battle against their evil inclinations, the dead weight of sin; a battle in which "heaven pulls you upwards; but you drag yourself downwards. Don't seek excuses!"[19]

A person ready to struggle hears God's voice ever more clearly and perceives His presence; but whoever surrenders to the enemy hears it faintly, even though it is never extinguished. "No darkness of error or of sin can totally take away from man the light of God the Creator."[20] "There is no human heart, no matter how deeply immersed sin, which does not

conceal, like embers among the ashes, a flicker of nobility.”[21]

Each person’s heart always harbors a yearning for God that is often not explicit but hidden behind the desire for truth and good, for justice and love, found also in so many people who don’t believe in God. Without realizing it, they are waiting for someone to speak to them about the Good, about Justice, about Love—about God—and explain to them with clarity that finding Him requires conversion: *repent and believe in the Gospel*,[22] Christ says.

Thus they will come to understand that God is the one who planted in their hearts these desires for truth and the good, first of all so that they may know and love Him, and also so that they may bear fruit in deeds of service to others. *It is full time now to wake from sleep*,[23] admonishes Scripture. God calls us to do good

with deeds, to establish justice and peace, to imbue everything with love. Not only with the love that comes from our own poor powers, but with an infinitely superior gift: *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*[24]

The encounter with God in the sanctuary of the conscience, personal conversion with the infusion of grace, should lead to a new life as children of God who seek to keep up an intimate dialogue with the Three Divine Persons present in the soul—to a contemplative life in the midst of ordinary activities that deeply influences the way we carry them out, because it leads to fulfilling them as well as possible, exercising the Christian virtues out of love.

The path that began by listening to God in the conscience is thus elevated and leads to an intimate

friendship with God. We become more sensitive to hearing God's voice in our soul: "He suggests his wishes in a whisper, deep in our conscience; and we must listen carefully to recognize his voice and be faithful."[25] We always need to preserve this attitude of attentive listening to our conscience that first led us to Him. "Return to your conscience, interrogate it... Return to your inner world, and in all that you do look to the Witness, look to God. [26]

Saint Josemaria, a great teacher of contemplation in ordinary life, urged us to foster interior recollection, an inner quiet reminding us that *only one thing is necessary*,[27] personal holiness. Becoming dispersed in eternal activities, postponing our meetings with God, clouds the soul with self-love, and even upright and good activities can lose their true meaning. "Seek God in the depths of

your pure, clean heart; in the depths of your soul when you are faithful to Him, and never lose that intimacy! And if ever you do not know how to speak to Him or what to say, or you do not dare to look for Jesus inside yourself, turn to Mary, *tota pulchra*, all pure and wonderful, and tell her: Our Lady and Mother, the Lord wanted you to be the one to look after God and tend him with your own hands. Teach me, teach us all, how to treat your Son.”[28]

Mary will teach us “to recognize the constant calls from God at the door of our heart,”[29] and will help us to awaken those around us, so that they may discover God’s voice and receive Him in their soul. “Let us ask her now: our Mother, you brought to earth Jesus, who reveals the love of our Father God. Help us to recognize Him in the midst of the cares of each day. Stir up our mind and will so that

we may listen to the voice of God, to the calls of grace.”[30]

[1] Vatican Council II, Past. Const. *Gaudium et spes*, 16.

[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1706.

[3] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 6 August 1993, 58.

[4] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 33.

[5] *Mt* 19:16-17.

[6] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 6 August 1993, 7.

[7] Cf. *Ex* 32:15-16; *2Cor* 3:3.

[8] Saint Augustine, *De vera religione*, 39, 72.

[9] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 6 August 1993, 12. Cf. *Rom* 2:15.

[10] Cf. Saint Thomas, *S. Th.*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2, ad 2.

[11] *Ibid.*, a. 2, c.

[12] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Evangelium vitae*, 25 March 1995, 20.

[13] Saint Bonaventure, *In III Sent.*, d. 39, a. 1, q. 3, c.

[14] Saint Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 45.

[15] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 6 August 1993, 58.

[16] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1777.

[17] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Dominum et vivificantem*, 18-V-1986, 36.

[18] *Rom* 7:22-24.

[19] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, 851.

[20] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 6 August 1993, 1.

[21] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 74.

[22] *Mk* 1:5.

[23] *Rom* 13:11.

[24] *Rom* 5:5.

[25] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 17.

[26] Saint Augustine, *In epistulam Iohannis ad Parthos tractatus*, 8, 9.

[27] *Lk* 10:41.

[28] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, 84.

[29] *Christ is Passing By*, 174.

[30] *Ibid.*

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